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Does Chile's Dictator Deserve to Buy Washington's Guns?

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SANTIAGO, Chile—Reagan Administration officials have been making pilgrimages here in recent weeks, seeking better relations with Chile and hoping to find grounds to support a decision to resume arms sales to the hard-line military dictatorship of Gen. Augusto Pinochet.

The process raises questions both about the need for improved relations and the American commitment to seek decent human-rights practices by right-wing, anti-communist governments.

Citing a need for more flexibility in American policy, the Administration has sought in its 18 months in office to redefine U.S. dealings with military regimes in South America, particularly toward ending the isolation imposed on Chile by the Ford and Carter presidencies. This is being done in the name of stability in the southern half of South America and because of the perceived need to strengthen anti-communist governments against any Soviet-Cuban activity in the area.

But to create a new climate, the Reagan Administration must first remove congressionally imposed restraints on bilateral ties, particularly on arms sales, suspended since 1976.

There are two major obstacles to turning the Congress around. First is the question of human rights. Chile has been judged a major violator of human rights since Pinochet took power in the bloody 1973 overthrow of Salvador Allende, the elected Marxist president. U.S. law prohibits arms sales to a number of countries—and Chile is on the list—unless the President certifies that the country in question has made significant progress in human rights.

The second, more specific obstacle to better relations is the case of Orlando Letelier, a former Allende foreign minister and Pinochet foe who was assassinated on the streets of Washington in September, 1975. A federal grand jury indicted three former Chilean security agents for complicity in the deaths of Letelier and his American assistant, Ronnie Moffit. However, Chile has refused to extradite the three men or try them in Chilean courts.

It was a basic tenet of American policy under the administrations of Gerald R. Ford and Jimmy Carter that relations with Santiago would not be improved until the three Chileans were brought to justice, a stand that Reagan officials have supported until now.

On the basis of recent interviews with American and Chilean officials here, it is clear the Reagan Administration wants to certify that the Pinochet regime has improved its human-rights record and should be allowed to buy American arms. But it is clear that continued U.S. congressional opposition is forcing the Administration to move slowly for fear of inciting American public opinion.

Richard Betts, an adviser to the National Security

Council and the Central Intelligence Agency, said here recently that Congress is unlikely to approve arms sales any time soon. In a recent seminar here sponsored by the U.S. Embassy and the Chilean army, Rep. David R. Bowen (D-Miss.) seconded that view and said that the American press has prejudiced Congress and the American people against the Pinochet government.

According to the U.S. Embassy, abuse of human rights under the Pinochet government has decreased considerably, particularly over the last two years. "Disappearances" of citizens at the hands of government agents have all but ended, embassy officials contend, and reports of torture have decreased. Some cautious opposition has even developed in the local press, particularly in economic matters. Even human-rights groups acknowledge that the current climate is less severe than during the 1973-1978 period, a time of brutal government repression.

But is this apparent change enough to reverse a policy that stretches back over three American presidencies?

Chile is still far from a happy place, particularly for the families of the more than 600 "disappeared" persons from earlier years. The ban on political activity remains, as evidenced by a phone call a Pinochet aide made to a leader of the Christian Democrat Party, the major opposition party still maintaining a semblance of structure.

"He told me that recent statements by some of us were getting out of hand," the Christian Democrat said in an interview. "He didn't threaten me outright, but he made it clear that it shouldn't happen again."

He said the call reminded him of what happened to four other Christian Democrats last year when they tried to talk to visiting American officials. All four were exiled and remain barred from Chile.

The Pinochet regime also practices "internal exile," a system under which the government sends dissidents to camps in desolate rural areas, not unlike the Soviet Union's practice of exiling opponents to Siberia.

Even though the Chilean press can mildly criticize the government's economic policies, political criticism is unacceptable. Nor can local editors run stories casting aspersions on Pinochet or members of his family. And, of course, Chile remains a military dictatorship, a fact underlined in unsubtle ways: submachine gun-toting police and soldiers standing on street corners and the nightly curfew. A state of siege is still in effect, even though anti-government terrorism has been virtually eliminated.

"Yes, they no longer kill and kidnap people as much anymore," said a Roman Catholic priest involved in human-rights work. "But they don't have to anymore. Pinochet has killed or driven out most of the active dissidents and he has made the rest of us afraid. Is this an improvement? I don't think so."

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